

Space, Figure, and Ground

...plus a few "rules" to tempt the unwary...

This lesson started out as something rather specific: a description of a well-known compositional rule of thumb. I wasn't quite satisfied with the way it was originally written, though, and decided to try to get it more in line with the stated aims of this course: to learn to think compositionally. So, it turned into something rather different -- an essay on the fundamental elements of composition: figure, ground, and space.

The objective of this lesson is to introduce three fundamental elements in compositional thinking: **division of space, figure, and ground**, learn to use them to think and talk about pictures, and learn a simple method with which to apply them in your own photography.

What is space?

Space is a deceptively simple concept over which much ink has been spilt -- see, for example, Henri Lefebvre's influential Marxist monograph, *The Production of Space*.

[<http://www.notbored.org/space.html>] (My wife read it, and *she* wouldn't have put it under the notbored.org domain name; I haven't even tried.) In this case, we'll use "space" in a very simple, almost trivial sense. We'll define it simply as the flat surface delimited by the edges (or "frame") of a picture.

The fundamental challenge in creating any picture is filling that space. If it's done successfully -- that everything within the space has a reason for being there and a relation to the other things in it -- a good picture results. If it's done badly, that is, the things within the space appear random, disjointed, or chaotic, if there's a lot of space that doesn't appear to be doing anything, you get a bad picture. Of course, this doesn't mean that there shouldn't be any empty space in the frame -- in fact, quite often this "negative space" is precisely what *makes* the picture. The point is that everything in the frame should be there for a reason, whether the reason was actually intended by the photographer, or merely emerged out of the image afterwards (as we could see in many photos submitted for Lesson Zero).

So, the first commandment of composition could be written simply as:

Fill the frame.

We humans make sense of the world by dividing it conceptually. Nature is continuous: any classification we impose on it is at least to some degree arbitrary. Where does your hand end and your wrist start? On what day does winter end and spring begin? If you cut your hair, do you cut off a part of yourself?

When thinking of the space that constitutes a picture, such divisions are especially arbitrary, and can often be made in several ways. Yet the idea of division of space helps -- both in understanding and appreciation of other people's work, and in creating your own.

In a very real sense, composition *is* the division of space. When you pick up a blank piece of paper and start turning it into a picture, the moment your pen touches it, you have divided the space in it. First, to dot and not-dot, then to line and not-line, left-of-line and right-of-line, eventually, if you draw a closed

curve, into inside and outside and -- maybe already -- into figure and ground. Of course, with a camera, the division of space can be an almost instantaneous event that happens at a shutter-press. This does not change the fundamental process: what preceded the shutter-press was the framing of the picture in the viewfinder. You as a photographer selected what to include and what to exclude; where the lines and areas and blocks of color and light and dark lie, that divide the black space of an unexposed frame turning it into a picture.

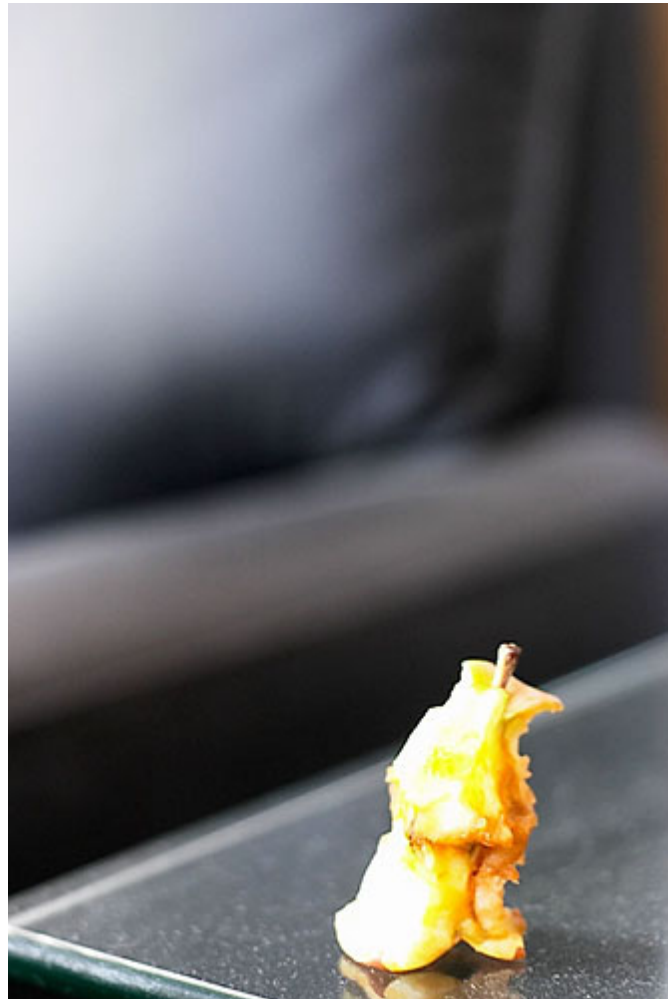
The next time you see a picture you like -- as a picture, not because of its subject matter -- look at it this way. How is the space in it used and divided? Is there "slop" in it -- areas that simply aren't interesting or don't add anything to the whole? Did the artist manage to "fill the frame?"



Fence and tracks in the snow, by alexo.

Figure and Ground

We can often identify one specific type of division of space when looking at pictures: the division between **figure** and **ground**. These terms are best defined tautologically: ground is everything that is not figure, and figure is everything that is not ground. Of course, not all pictures with "artistic merit" (whatever this may mean) have an identifiable or unambiguous figure and ground, but surprisingly many do. In any case, the concepts are highly useful, again when thinking about other people's pictures, and when creating your own.



Apple core, by hinius. I think you can tell what I mean by figure and ground just by looking at the picture.

The relation between figure and ground (or figures and grounds, as the case may be) is one of the things that makes or breaks pictures. If the figure and ground have some sort of identifiable visual relation with each other, with some purpose (either instinctive or considered) in placing them in the relation they are, the picture is generally more effective than one where the relationship is disconnected or random.

For example, the typical holiday snapshot of your significant other standing in front of a monument is usually not photographically very exciting, because the background and foreground don't really meld or talk to one another; it's just a person and a scene, splat. That simple picture could be improved a great deal if you did something to create a connection between the figure and the ground -- for example, asked your significant other to lean against a piece of stonework and admire the monument. Now, she's a part of the scene rather than something disconnected from it.



Joanna herding sheep, by Petteri.

So, here we can derive another principle of composition -- although, being more specific, it's less universally applicable than the previous one:

Identify the figure and the ground, and create a relationship between them.

In the above snapshot, Joanna and the stubborn sheep constitute the "figure" I had in mind when shooting it, while the rest of the scene constitutes the "ground." The connection is created by Joanna's physical contact with the sheep, and the similarity of the sheep with the other sheep in the background -- and pulled together by the lucky chance of having a sheep mugging for the camera at top left just at the right moment.

But how to create that division into figure and ground, and re-connection as a relationship?

There are an infinite number of answers to that question, none of which are really "right" or "wrong." Generally, it's a good idea to start with the subject, and make that the figure. If this doesn't work out -- for example, the subject you're *really* interested in is too big to be a figure -- you might want to choose to make your subject the ground instead, and look for something more or less random to be the figure: we'll return to this theme later in the course... I think.

The connection could be thematic, based on color or color contrast, the creative use of depth of field, based on form or texture or tone, based on the line of sight (people are *great* at following lines of sight -- that's why having your model look at the beautiful scenery works so well in tying it together), or, well, pretty much anything really. Sometimes the connections are pre-existing and only need to be recognized; at other times, they can be "engineered" in -- either by changing something in the scene, or simply by changing your point of view, framing, or something else.

A few dos and don'ts

Moving on -- to the ever more specific, ever more controversial, and ever less universally applicable. Let's have a few things that have generally been discovered to either work (or not) in figure-ground juxtapositions. Here, note especially that these are guidelines, not rules: sometimes breaking them may create a more effective picture than following them, but I can't see there being any harm in knowing to look out for them.

- **Decide what's your figure and what's the ground.** If you're taking a picture of your significant other by the Notre Dame of Paris, you should decide which you're going to emphasize. By including both at the same "weight," the cathedral and the person will be competing for status as the figure, which will

probably not work... unless you manage to create that connection or juxtaposition between them.

- **Put something in the foreground.** Pictures with a sense of depth to them tend to be more compelling than ones that look "flat." Even if what you're really interested in is the beautiful view, the picture will very likely be much more powerful if you include something close by in it.
- **Avoid joins.** The scene you're photographing is three-dimensional, but the picture will be a flat plane. This means that unless the picture contains strong visual cues about depth (something we'll talk about later), the figure and ground are easily melded together: what's intended as the ground looks like a part of the figure. The classic case is photographing a person in front of a palm tree, resulting in a picture where it looks like the tree is growing out of his head. At times, this might be just what you need -- but either way, look out for joins: if unintentional, they probably won't look great.

The Rule of Thirds

Finally, we're getting to the bit Ed hates: the Rule of Thirds. There's good reason to hate it, too -- first, because it's called a "rule" (which implies that there's some sort of punishment for breaking it), and second, because it's actually the dumbed-down version of a really beautiful, almost mystical property that crops up in art, nature, biology, mathematics, and other unusual places with surprising regularity. I'm talking about the Golden Section. If you're an experienced photographer familiar with the Rule of Thirds, skip the rest of this lesson and read up on the Golden Section instead -- there's a wealth of information available on it on the Internet [<http://www.google.com/search?q=golden+section>] as well as the local library.

Still, there's something to be said for the RoT: it's simple enough to be applied easily in hand-held photography, and it'll almost always result in a more interesting picture than the default non-composition of putting your subject bang in the middle of the frame at middle distance. (In fact, Kodak came up with it to help people get nicer snapshots.) It'll also force you to identify the figure and the ground, and think about how you can divide the rest of the space in the future picture -- even if you end up not applying it, just thinking about it may have come in useful. Personally, the RoT is something of a fallback "rule" for me: if no other way of composing a picture suggests itself to me, I figure hey, I can't go too badly wrong with the good ol' RoT.

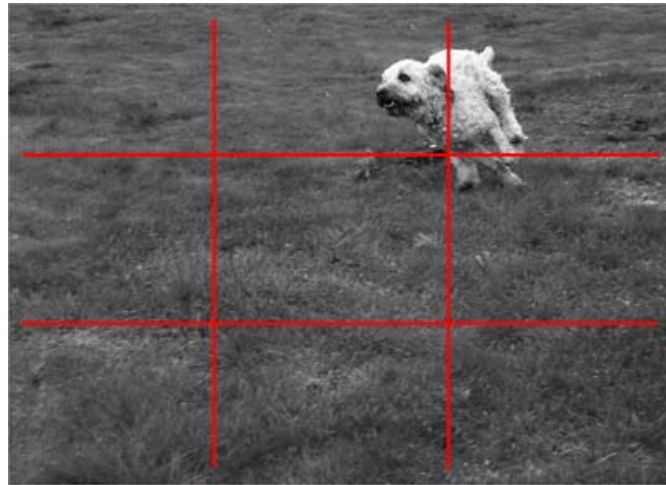
One word of warning, though: don't *ever* mistake the RoT, or any compositional rule, for that matter, for a standard or photographic excellence. Many amateur "camera club" critics make this mistake -- I've even heard that some judge in a club competition knocked points off a picture because the subject was a few *millimeters* off the position prescribed by the RoT, and I remember a discussion on DPRReview where some guy had RoT guides etched on his viewfinder so he could follow it more accurately. Sometimes critics deserve the reputation they have, although I don't think they're *all* bad.

What is the RoT?

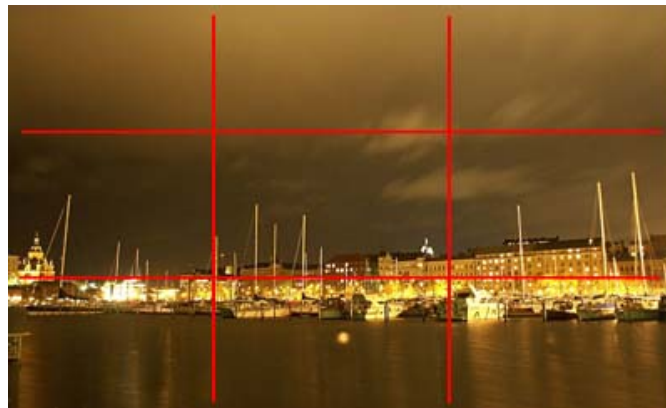
The Rule of Thirds is very simple in principle: you mentally divide the area of the picture into thirds, with two vertical and two horizontal lines, and compose your picture around the nine areas and four intersections. There are many ways to apply it; in fact, so many that with hindsight you'll find it possible to apply it to many pictures that have already been taken, whether the photographer had the RoT in mind or not.

Subject positioning

The simplest variant is to put your subject near one of the four intersections. Like this:



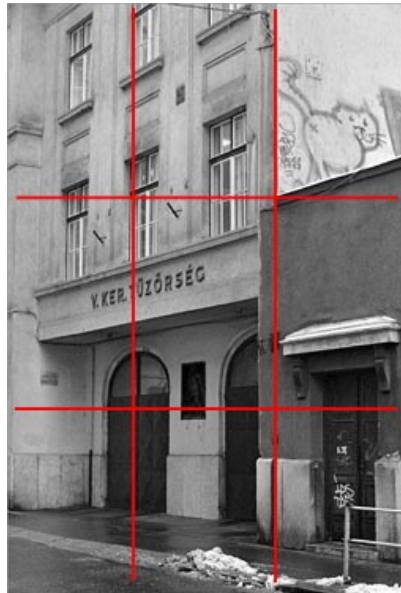
However, this isn't all. For example, the RoT gives a good rule of thumb for where to put the horizon on a landscape. For example:



Of course, the horizon could just as well have been on the top line; this time, though, I thought the sky was more interesting than the water, so I put it where it is.

The RoT in division of space

Yet another idea is to compose the picture around the regions delimited by the lines, not by the lines or the intersections:



This picture would've been a lot nicer if it had had something or someone in the foreground. I should've waited until someone came by, but the weather was cold, wet, and miserable, and we were impatient.

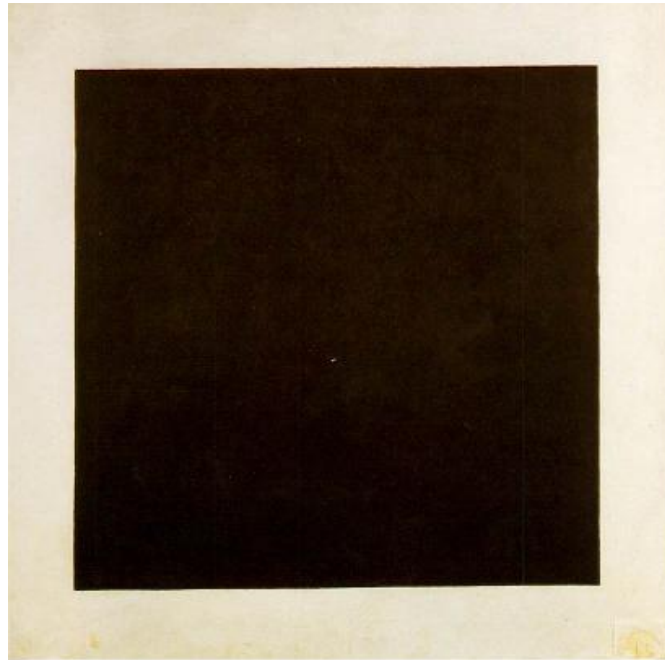
Assignment

1. Pick a picture you like from the assignments submitted for the previous lesson -- not yours, but somebody else's. Discuss the division of space in it. Does it have an identifiable figure and ground, or several figures and grounds? Could it be possible to interpret what is the figure and what is the ground in more than one way? Do you think the photographer had some specific idea of the division of space in mind when s/he shot it?
2. Grab a camera like for the previous assignment. Identify a subject and study it and its surroundings. Use the subject as the figure and the surroundings as the ground. Create a connection or relationship between the figure and the ground. Shoot several variants, and present the one you like best. Discuss what you did, why, how you did it, and why you chose the variant that you did.
3. **Extra credit:** Create an abstraction. Read the appendix, and look up some of the abstract artists suggested in it. Take your time; shoot lots of variants. Think about how to create something interesting even if it isn't a picture of something: maybe it reminds you of something, evokes a memory or an emotion, just produces some kind of regular pattern, or maybe it's just that the colors are nice. If you find it helpful to use the Rule of Thirds or the Golden Section for your abstraction, by all means do so, but don't feel compelled to restrict yourself to these choices. Discuss why you created the abstraction the way you created it, what you were trying to achieve, and how well you think you achieved it. Oh, and don't worry if it's not quite as abstract as most of the stuff the artists in the appendix did -- even Malevich and the other Suprematists occasionally included some figurative stuff in their abstractions. The main point is that the picture shouldn't be primarily a picture of something; rather, the interest should lie in the way the space is divided in the picture itself.

Appendix: What is an abstraction?

An abstraction is something that's not readily identifiable as a picture "of" something. It's nonfigurative. Instead, it evokes associations and emotions by division of space in and of itself. However, most abstract

artists didn't consider their work as something disconnected from "reality" -- on the contrary, they wanted their art to capture something more fundamental and "true" than mere pictorial representation. In fact, the very term "abstraction" implies the question -- abstraction *of what?*



Black Square. Kasimir Malevich, oil on canvas, 1913.

There's a famous abstract painting by the Ukrainian artist Kasimir Malevich, called "Black Square" [http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/malevich/black_square.jpg.html] (1913). On the face of it, it's the very epitome of abstract art -- just a black square painted carefully on a piece of white canvas. A bit of boring, pretentious, artistic snobbery, only to be appreciated by the initiated? Not at all.

"Black Square" snaps into a whole different focus if you know one thing, and you're told another.

1. Russian Orthodox homes have a corner of the room reserved for an ikon, and a place to burn tapers in front of it. The ikon representing the Christ is placed near the ceiling, looking down into the room.
2. Kasimir Malevich displayed "Black Square" in the corner of a room, near the ceiling, tilted to look down into it.

I still get a shock of "meaning" when I recall these two simple facts. The featureless black square is suddenly transformed into something of awesome power -- a challenge shouted out to nothing less than God! By usurping the space reserved for an ikon of the Christ, the Black Square *becomes* an ikon itself. This raises another question: of *what* is the black square an ikon? What does *it* represent? *It is an abstraction -- of what?*

The power of abstract art lies in the capacity of a "pure" division space to raise such associations. Whether these associations are inherent in the work of art or "brought to it" by the audience is, to my mind, irrelevant. The point is that it can be done: in order to convey something fundamental of a thing, you do not need to represent it; in fact, sometimes the most powerful way to convey an idea is by such means. The anti-religious propaganda posters and paintings in the Socialist Realist style, with their fat clerics, tangle-bearded monks, and triumphant laborers look trite and frankly silly next to the simple,

arrogant statement of Malevich's Black Square.

For further inspiration, you might want to check out the works of Kasimir Malevich, [<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/malevich.html>] Vasili Kandinsky, [<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/K/kandinsky.html>] or Jackson Pollock, [<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/P/pollock.html>] to name a few. Or you might want to look at the evolution of, say, Piet Mondrian [<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/mondrian.html>] from the figurative to the non-figurative.



*Roof structure in an abandoned building on the Nahr Beirut, by Joanna S-S. There's nothing inherently interesting about the roof -- but I think the pattern the beams make, the light and dark, the flecks of blue, and even the feeling of motion imparted by the camera shake make the **picture** of the roof interesting to look at. It also evokes a strong emotion for me.*

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